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SUBJECT: FIJI GOVERNMENT BANS METHODIST CONFERENCE

11. Summary: On May 28, Fiji's military-led government banned the Methodist Church from holding its annual national conference after deeming the conference a threat to national security under the Public Emergency Regulations (PER). The agenda for the August conference reportedly included a discussion of the April 10 abrogation of Fiji's constitution and the deferment of elections until 2014. Fiji's Methodist Church supported the 1987 and 2000 coups but opposed the December 2006 coup that brought Commodore Bainimarama and the current de facto government to power. Church President Reverend Ame Tugauwe met with Bainimarama, who demanded the removal of two Methodist ministers. The Church leadership refused the demand but has sought another meeting with Bainimarama in what Embassy believes will be a futile attempt to resolve the impasse. Effectively tipping over the collection plate by banning the Church's main fundraising event, Bainimarama has only exacerbated the regime's conflict with the Methodists. End summary.

Nationalist Leanings

12. The current impasse began on May 14 when police arrested Reverend Manasa Lasaro, a former president of the Methodist Church and currently the director of the Church's Social Programs Division. The government released Lasaro without charge on May 15, but Bainimarama demanded his resignation. Bainimarama also insisted on the removal of Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi. Both ministers were close supporters of past nationalist coup leaders. Lasaro is a nationalist politician who ran for office unsuccessfully in the 1999 and 2001 elections. When the Fiji Methodist Church initially opposed the first coup in 1987, Lasaro led a faction against the church leadership. The faction ousted then-President Josateki Koroi, and Lasaro became president. Lasaro was close to then-coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka. Lasaro and the Church leadership succeeded in getting Rabuka to impose a ban of all commercial activities and sports on Sundays. In the 1990 Constitution, Rabuka also declared Fiji a Christian state, despite the presence in Fiji of a large Indo-Fijian community comprised mostly of Hindus and Moslems. Reverend Tomasi Kanailagi was president of the Methodist Church during the 2000 coup by George Speight. Kanailagi openly supported that coup and won appointment as a senator when Laisenia Qarase won the 2001 general election. The Methodist Church refused to dismiss Kanailagi and Lasaro but did agree to removing politics from the meeting agenda for its annual conference scheduled to convene in August. Bainimarama stated that the annual conference will not take place until the Church removes Lasaro and Kanailagi.

Preempting Formal Opposition

13. The Methodist Church relies on its annual conference for its

budget in the form of a choir and fundraising competition among its 52 divisions. These annual conferences collect on average over USD 1 million, which is necessary for the running of the church administration and its schools. The May 29 decision of the military to ban the conference appears to be aimed at making the Methodist leadership rethink the costs of its opposition to the de facto government. In April, Lasaro authored a paper sent out to the 52 divisions discussing the removal of the constitution and the limitation of rights after the April 9 decision of the Fiji court of appeal in favor of ousted Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. Lasaro recommended that the 52 divisions endorse his proposal for peaceful resistance to the de facto government. The 52 divisions, comprising both laity and clergy, met in early May. Fifty divisions approved the proposal, which was on the agenda for the annual meeting of all of the Methodist clergy. The meeting was to have convened in Rewa, a province that happens to be a center of anti-regime sentiment. Were the conference to have gone ahead as scheduled, the Church likely would have formalized its opposition to the de facto government.

REGIME'S ONLY REMAINING ORGANIZED OPPOSITION

14. Since its December 2006 coup, the military regime has succeeded in stifling opposition from all quarters, including the previously powerful Great Council of Chiefs, which it disbanded in April 2007. The PER, enacted by presidential decree following the abrogation of April 10, provided the regime with a potent legal pretext for the new Draconian measures it has taken since to prevent political assembly, neutralize the Fiji Law Society, remove unfavorable judges from the judiciary, and censor the media. To all intents and purposes, the Methodist Church was the only remaining major organization opposed to the coup. It had organized a campaign against the Peoples Charter, touted by the de facto government as its reform manifesto. After three very senior chiefs made a formal request in the traditional manner at the 2008 annual conference, the Church leadership distributed a form to its congregants urging them to reject the Charter. (The regime claims over 60 percent of Fiji's people approved the Charter, but few critics believe the figure in the face of the Methodist opposition and in the absence of a referendum.)

SECTARIAN DIVIDE

15. Fiji's two biggest Christian denominations are divided on the coup. The Catholic Church, which did not support the 1987 and 2000 coups, appears to be supporting the current de facto government. Archbishop Petero Mataca even agreed to co-chair, with Bainimarama, the National Council for Building a Better Fiji, which produced the draft Peoples Charter, the de facto government's manifesto. Prominent Catholic priests close to Mataca sit on the Electoral and Constituency Boundaries Commission. The Methodist Church, however, has joined with other Christian denominations with membership in the Assembly of Christian Churches in Fiji (ACCF) by refusing to participate in the NCBBF process. In total, ACCF claims about 300,000 members, most of whom are indigenous Fijian. Catholic Archbishop Mataca called for calm after the military announced the ban on the Methodist conference. ACCF members have remained silent about the Methodist conference but held a joint church service attended by 5,000 people in Nausori two weeks ago.

COMMENT

16. Whether the Methodist Church in Fiji will allow itself to be muzzled remains to be seen. By pre-empting the Church's internal debate on its future direction in Fiji's post-constitutional environment, the regime has now embittered the leadership and laity of Fiji's largest congregation. The deeper antagonism could surface as a source of friction in the Fiji military's rank and file, especially if the government takes even more drastic measures, such as censoring sermons from its pulpits or interfering in its administration. Effectively tipping over the collection plate by banning the Church's main fundraising event, Bainimarama has only

exacerbated the regime's conflict with the Methodists. End
Comment.

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